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CÆSAR'S SIGNET

By DUFFIELD OSBORNE

WHEN I am as old as my very good friend Luther Carton L.H.D. Oxon., I may know as much as he about ancient engraved gems. Still, I doubt it. Oxford does not give learned degrees as acknowledgments for new dormitories. Incidentally his stupendous acquirement of exact scientific knowledge has never dehumanized him. He is what I call a romantic archæologist and I do not think he represents the term. Best of all—from my standpoint—he never minds my intruding upon his labors on what most men of his kind would regard as frivolous grounds—to find out whether some insignificant bronze is ancient or a forgery or to set him puzzling over the often untranslatable inscription on a Gnostic gem. It was this latter quest that took me to his rooms on a certain evening last winter, and brought me in touch with an affair that quite drove both gem and inscription from my mind.

I had hardly seated myself after perfunctory apologies, when his telephone bell rang and he turned to take up the receiver. I listened, perforce, to his end of the conversation.

"Yes, this is Dr. Carton. Oh! Mr. Gair! Good evening. Yes, yes. Certainly, I'll be at home to-night. No; glad to see you. I'll be happy to be of any assistance I can. Good-bye."

He hung up the receiver and turned to me, smiling.

"I wonder what he's got now," he said. "Says he wants my help."

"Is it Stephen Gair?" I asked.

Carton nodded.

"Then I fancy I'd better call again when you're disengaged."

"Not at all," he protested. "Two opinions are better than one, if he's got something he wants placed."

That's the kind of flattery that always makes a dilettante feel like purring.

It is not necessary to say much about Stephen Gair. An omnivorous collector of everything, from Greek statues to Chinese snuff-bottles, his millions make him the envy of us little men. After all, though, I doubt I'd change my pleasure in securing some good thing for a song on the strength of my knowing more than the other fellow, for all Gair's spectacular, full-priced buys through the medium of his corps of hired experts.

Gair did not keep us waiting long. He bustled in, with his dominant manner, shook hands with Carton and gave me a rather dubious three fingers.

"This is a rather peculiar matter, Doctor" he began, "I shall want to speak confidentially."

I rose promptly, but Carton motioned me back.

"My friend is as close-mouthed as myself, Mr. Gair" he said "and it's quite likely he may be as able to help you as I."

Gair nodded carelessly, but I doubted his satisfaction at the suggestion. He hesitated a moment and then burst out:

"Truth is, Doctor, I've been robbed of the most important thing in my collection."

Carton's eyebrows rose and I leaned forward.

"I don't see how the thief can sell it for what it is," he went on. "Probably he's just an ordinary pilferer. It will go for a few dollars and turn up in the shops or with some small collector. What I thought

was, that you might hear of it somehow, and I wanted to let you know as soon as possible."

"What is it?" asked Carton.

"It's the signet of Julius Cæsar."

"What!" we both exclaimed.

Gair smiled grimly. "It's all right, too," he said. "I've got it absolutely straight, if it did cost me twenty thousand dollars."

I saw that Carton's interest had been thoroughly awakened and my own was on edge. Little wonder! Here was unquestionably the greatest gem in the world. No discovery could equal it, save, perhaps, an Alexander portrait by Pyrgoteles.

"You have a cast for me?" asked Carton.

Gair fished a wad of tissue paper from his vest pocket and unrolled it, showing a small plaster cast. Carton and I bent over it eagerly.

Certainly the thing was a beautiful example of the gem-engraver's art: a slightly concave surface as from a convex stone, bearing an impression of a Venus Victrix, as described by Dion Cassius. Half draped and with one leg flexed, she leaned on a low column, as we find her in so many cheap reproductions of the times, a dart in one hand, the other holding out the conventional helmet. Down one side was engraved CÆ in the ligatured script of the Republic and beneath the figure CΛCOCÆΑΣ in Greek letters of rather unusual form, as on the lovely head of Medusa in the British Museum, the only known work of Sosokles.

I was breathing audibly in my excitement and found myself wondering whether Stephen Gair would ever see that gem again if I were the fortunate locator of it. I am accounted honest, but, all the same, I wondered.

"What is the stone?" asked Carton, and, knowing him as I did, I marveled rather at the lack of emotion in his voice.

"Emerald," said Gair. "Not modern gem quality, of course. You know Alexander the Great had his portrait cut only in emerald. Doubtless Cæsar adopted the idea from him."

Gair's erudition rather surprised me, but I imagined he'd got the point from whomever sold him the stone.

"Tell me all the facts" went on Carton.

Gair hesitated. "It's awkward" he said at last "since I'm asking your help; but that's the one thing I can't do. As a condition of getting the gem I promised to keep my possession of it unknown for at least a year and never to tell how or where it was found or how it came to me. I'm afraid I've violated the first promise, as it is, but then, I *haven't* the stone now, and I know you're discreet."

"Isn't such a compact rather unfortunate?" said Carton. "Doesn't it cast a permanent shadow over the authenticity of the object?"

"Perhaps, to the public mind; but I know it's genuine, and I'd rather have it on those terms than not at all. I presume there'll be no objection to filing a statement of facts somewhere, to be opened in, say, fifty years. That will secure the knowledge for posterity."

Carton laughed. "Well," he said, "as you cannot tell me the story, I suppose I'll have to tell it to *you*."

That erudite archæologist and estimable gentleman Signor Enrico Salvati unearthed Cæsar's funeral urn in the course of the Government excavations in the mausoleum of Augustus. The stone was in the urn and we'll have to chalk up another good man gone wrong along of you millionaires."

Gair sat with wide-open eyes and lips parted. "I—I didn't know you aspired to the mantle of Sherlock Holmes" he gasped.

"I do not" said Carton. "It didn't take close observation or very subtle deduction to grasp the situation. You know as well as I do, that gem and inscription could be forged. Nothing but such evidence as I detailed would have made you feel safe to pay twenty thousand dollars. There's no record, but it cannot be doubted that, when Augustus built his family mausoleum, he deposited Cæsar's ashes in it. Everybody knows that Salvati has been in charge of the excavations there and it's been rumored that Forli takes over the job this year. Also I seem to recall reading in some newspaper that Mr. Stephen Gair and Doctor Enrico Salvati were among the illustrious passengers arriving on the *Mauretania* last week, the latter to spend two months inspecting American collections. Does a man who uses his brain at all want anything further?"

"I can't say a word" said Gair, shaking his head and with his composure now well in hand.

"You needn't" replied Carton "but you can describe to me exactly where and how you kept the stone, who saw it, and who, if any one, could have had access to it. Give me the case just as you would give it to a detective."

Gair thought a moment. Then he said:

"It was in a secret drawer in a private safe that stands in my bedroom, wrapped in cotton in a paste-board box, together with several plaster casts."

"What else was in the safe?"

"Personal papers and about a thousand dollars for running expenses."

"Anything else missing?"

"No, I cannot be sure of the exact amount of cash, but it's substantially intact."

"How often have you had the gem out since you put it in the safe, and was any one else ever present? You needn't mention names."

Gair smiled. "I had it out four times during the week I've owned it" he said. "Twice to examine and enjoy it myself and twice—and I may say, the last time—with the person from whom I got it. It was when I looked to-day that it was gone."

"Each time you put the box back yourself?"

"Yes, and it's there now."

"Have you any theory as to how it went?"

"No" said Gair slowly, "I believe all my people are honest. Most of them have been with me for years. Anyhow, the safe hadn't been tampered with. I'm sure of that."

"So am I" said Carton.

"I cannot evolve any possible explanation unless I walk in my sleep. A man of your powers of deduction doesn't need me to say that the one person who could not have stolen it is the one who was with me twice when I took it out—the seller. He of all men had no motive."

"Quite so" acquiesced Carton. "Any disposal of it by him—even handing it to his government, as he should have done at first, would convict him. If he sold it to one of the half-dozen men who might pay

the price, you'd be sure to hear before very long, and he knows that a word in certain quarters from an international power like you would ruin him. To cover a last possibility, he's the most unromantic scientist I ever ran across, which is saying a good deal. Our friend wouldn't care a rap for either the beauty or the associations of Cæsar's signet. He knew its cash value, but he'd take no such chances on an unconvertible gem. By the way, when did he leave the city and how long is his museum tour to be?"

"Yesterday, for Philadelphia, and he returns here to sail in just six weeks. "No" went on Gair reflectively, "only two types of thief could have done the job. A romantic collector to whom possession, known only to himself, would be sufficient or an ignorant sneak—inside or out—who'd be content to pawn it for a few dollars."

Carton nodded. "Admirably digested" he said; "and now, Mr. Gair, I won't promise to get your gem back, but I'll have your twenty thousand dollars for you on the twenty-eighth of next month."

Gair and I looked dazed. He gulped once or twice, started to say something, stopped, and then: "Thank you, Doctor. I hoped you'd be interested." He didn't refer to the subject again, just talked a little while on other topics and bade us good night.

When he had gone I turned to Carton.

"Wasn't that a pretty stiff promise?" I asked.

"I think not" he said abstractedly, and then I too had the sense to say good-night.

During the next few weeks I called on Carton several times and we discussed many subjects. The one that was uppermost in my mind I never broached, for I knew my friend well enough to know that he'd get to it when he was ready and not before. Once he asked me with a sly smile if I'd run across the Cæsar signet yet in the shops, and I blushed because I actually had been in about fifty places; antique stores and pawnbrokers.

Gair's suggestion of the ignorant sneak-thief, though I couldn't quite figure how such a person could have worked the job, struck me as the probable solution, and I fancied Carton was doing some underground advertising in his own way. The enthusiast with the opportunity did not exist; Salvati without a motive was out of the question, and so the great detective principle of elimination left us but one workable hypothesis. That money was not taken, or at least not much, argued, despite Gair's confidence, that one of his servants was the criminal. Ignorant of the importance of the stone he had hoped, doubtless, that its absence and perhaps that of a few dollars might not be noticed.

"You're a good boy" Carton said to me one day. "I promise you shall be in at the death." Therefore I waited fairly patiently.

The twenty-eighth drew nearer. In my soul I had faith that Carton would make good. In my brain I could not, for the life of me, imagine how. It was the afternoon of the twenty-seventh when my telephone rang and I recognized my friend's voice in the receiver.

"Anything on to-night?"

"Certainly not" I replied in an injured tone. "I haven't made an engagement for the last two weeks."

"Oh! That's it, is it?" he said slowly, and then, after a short pause:

"Well, forget all about it to-night and come round and meet Salvati. You've never met him, have you?"

"No," I said "but I'll be glad to. Think he's got Cæsar's signet?"

"I'm sure he hasn't. I'll look for you about eight o'clock."

Well, I sat down and thought some more. It would be unreasonable to suppose that Salvati's call had nothing to do with the stolen gem. Carton would not be wasting his last night, but I confess I could not divine how the Italian archæologist could help or how Carton could even apply to him. It was a quarter before eight when I arrived, determined to ask no questions that might disclose my befuddlement; I knew my host would not answer questions one moment the sooner for their being asked.

He relieved me of my coat, led me into his study, waved me toward a chair before the fire and shoved the tobacco jar across the table.

"I doubt Salvati gets in here before eight-thirty," he said. "Interesting man, Salvati. You'll be glad to meet him."

"I certainly will," I answered. "How does he come to call?"

I fear I wasn't holding very hard to my resolution, but Carton answered carelessly:

"Oh! I've known him a good while, and I wrote some weeks ago and asked him to drop in before he sailed. Said I had something special to show him; I knew that would fetch him. He knows I don't enthuse about trifles."

"What have you got?" I asked eagerly. "You've kept it mighty quiet."

"Only had it a couple of days," he answered apologetically.

I, at least, am no Sherlock Holmes, but it seemed clear to the merest tyro at deduction that Carton was fibbing. How could he have written Salvati "some weeks ago" to come and see something he'd had only a couple of days? I grinned at him a bit sardonically, lit my pipe and fell a-wondering.

Carton began to discuss the latest phase of Minoan chronology. Then his bell rang and he went again to the door of his apartment, returning a moment later with a tall, slim man of about fifty, whose once black moustache was graying fast.

I had risen and was duly presented to the Roman savant, and then Carton wheeled up another chair before the fire and produced a box of cigarettes.

"What a delightful little study!" began Salvati in excellent English, when he had lit a cigarette and glanced about. "It is a fitting place whence come the works of the great Professor Carton."

"Oh! it does well enough," said Carton carelessly. "Rather quiet for New York. But I'm not going to keep you sparring. I know you're curious and impatient, as is my friend here. Truth is I've got something you'll both want, but which only you, my dear Professor, can afford to buy. Therefore I've kept it specially for you before giving any one else a chance."

"That's very good of you," said Salvati with a rather puzzled look.

Meanwhile Carton, who had been fumbling in his vest pocket, pulled out a roll of tissue paper, unwrapped it and handed his guest a convex green stone, engraved with some device.

I saw Salvati start as he glanced at it, and for a moment I thought the gem would drop from his

fingers. Then he gathered himself with an effort and drew out his pocket magnifying glass.

"It looks good," he said. "We shall see."

"It's more than good," said Carton. "It's the most important historic gem in the world. Look close," for Salvati was now examining it through his glass. "It's Cæsar's signet."

I need not tell you my thoughts. I knew things were happening and that there was a tenseness in the atmosphere of the little study quite foreign to the usual academic calm. Salvati was clearly the storm centre and I could not but admire the way he had himself in hand, after the first shock.

"The conventional Venus Victrix design; yes," he said slowly; "and signed, apparently by Sosokles. I am sorry, my dear Professor Carton, but I think it is a forgery."

He looked my friend straight in the eyes and held out the gem to him.

"A forgery?" said Carton carelessly. "You really believe so? but surely a very clever one. Examine it closely, Professor, I am sure you'll feel you must have it."

Salvati's eyes dropped at last. He made a show of examining the stone again, but it struck me he had lost a little of his poise.

"What do you think it worth?" he asked, a trifle over-casually, I fancied.

"Twenty thousand dollars," said Carton.

I gasped, but I heard Salvati saying calmly:

"Oh! but that is absurd—for what I fear is only an imitation. Besides, I could not begin to afford it."

Carton leaned forward.

"My dear Professor," he said slowly. "Believe me, the one thing you can't afford is *not* to buy it." Again Salvati examined the stone even more carefully.

"You consider it genuine?" he said at last, looking up; "and the attribution? do you think it can be substantiated?"

Carton spread out his hands.

"In the presence of higher authority, I am silent on such questions. Professor Salvati can judge for himself and no one can judge better. Therefore I say he simply must take such a relic back to Rome with him. Odd, it should turn up here in America, isn't it?"

Then Salvati gave way. Whatever the game was, and of course I realized there was a game, he saw he had lost. His next words were those of surrender.

"I am a poor man, Dr. Carton, but if this stone be what it purports, I agree with you that I must have it. I suppose I can get the money by——" and he paused.

"By to-morrow noon?" said Carton.

"Assuredly" went on the Italian "and I take it this transaction is strictly confidential? In a way I have no business to buy and you will understand that for many reasons I must keep my ownership secret. For one thing my government—might misunderstand the source of my acquisition."

"Obviously" agreed Carton. "I assure you no one will ever know of this transaction from either my friend or myself."

A look of relief passed over Salvati's face. "Very well then" he said "I will send for the gem in the morning. You will show it to no one else?"—this last eagerly.

"No one" replied Carton, and the Italian rose.

"You will pardon me, my friend" he said, "if the—the circumstances—" and for the first time his voice rang uncertain; "getting the money so soon, you know, necessitates my leaving you earlier than I had hoped."

"Quite comprehensible" said Carton, and he showed his guest ceremoniously out. Then he came back laughing softly. "Clever chap, Salvati. Knows when to lie down. Didn't he carry it off mighty well, considering?"

"If Salvati's clever, and I'll have to take your word for it" I said, irritated at what must seem my own denseness "it's more than I am. I assure you I haven't the faintest idea of what this whole performance means. Salvati did not steal the signet, because you have it; yet, instead of turning it over to Gair you deliberately force this poor devil to buy it—oh! I don't doubt it's all very simple to the ordinarily intelligent, but you've got me going."

Carton laughed again. "Must I really trace it out for you?" he asked.

"You surely must."

"Well, then, I'm only selling Salvati a facsimile of the stone."

"And who's getting away with Gair's?" I exclaimed.

"Gair's is probably ground to powder by this time."

"Cæsar's signet ground to powder!" I exclaimed in horror.

"Hold fast" said Carton. "I'll explain. It *was* Salvati, after all, who stole the gem. It seemed impossible from the first that any one else could have done so and Salvati certainly had the opportunity. What cleared him in your mind and Gair's was the lack of motive, but I assumed that it was much more likely he had some motive we three had not guessed, than that any one else had worked the combination of Gair's private safe. I confess, at first I could not fathom it. Then, while Gair gave his facts and I examined the cast, the light began to break. Did you notice that the surface of the plaster showed minute pittings as from a badly aged gem?"

"If I did, I took them for the imperfections that most casts have."

"Not Gair's, my dear fellow. I felt sure they were in the stone—that its surface was considerably pitted—and, mind you, 'it came from a tomb urn' where it would have been protected from ordinary forces of disintegration and wear. That spelled the sand-blast."

"A forgery, after all?" I exclaimed.

"How would you reason on the signature of Sosokles?"

"It is identical with the unusual form on the Medusa."

"Yes; well?"

"I see. A forger follows the one genuine signature closely. Sosokles himself surely made no practice of signing like that when space requirements did not control. It's a point, but it's not conclusive."

"Certainly not, but is it likely that Cæsar would carry a signet with another's name on it? Would he feel the slightest need of adding an abbreviation of his own name? Would there be any signet in Rome so well known? and does not the whole inscription smack of the overdoing of the interest features by a too clever forger?"

"It certainly looks suspicious" I admitted.

"Did not the emerald idea, following the precedent of Alexander, strike you as another possible touch of overdone interest?"

"It fits into that hypothesis."

"Well, I got so far and then it flashed on me that while Salvati would have no conceivable motive to steal back the gem if genuine, he would have every motive to steal back a *fake* which he had had made and sold to Gair for twenty thousand dollars, and which Gair would show in a year. Can't you see him getting cold feet when he imagined you and me and one or two others looking the thing over?—getting cold feet, perhaps, all of a sudden—and jumping at a chance to filch the evidence of his fraud and wipe it out of existence?"

"By Jove. I believe you're right!" I cried. "No point by itself is quite damning, but together they make the thing look very fishy. Even so, though, I don't understand to-night."

"Oh! well; when I got as far as believing that Gair had been victimized from the first, I knew of course that Kostaboulos of Athens was the only living engraver who could have done that job. So I risked sending him the cast next day and ordering a facsimile of his recent work. Naturally he assumed I was in the secret, and anyhow I doubt the gentleman would throw away two hundred for any such sentiment as playing straight with a former customer. When he agreed by cable, as I requested, that settled Salvati. Too bad old Kos neglected to age my specimen as thoroughly as he did the other, but it won't stay long in existence, so never mind. I warrant Salvati is doing some pretty hard thinking about it all"; and Carton fell to chuckling contentedly.

Well, there's not much more to the story. The money came promptly next morning and the second emerald went to its new owner and to whatever fate was in store for it. Gair called the same afternoon, at Carton's telephone request, and I enjoyed that interview quite as much as the other, though perhaps it was something of an anti-climax. Carton handed him the twenty thousand in cash, and Gair, while profuse in his thanks, said never a word to voice the astonishment he must have felt. He took the dénouement tactfully and as a matter of course.

"My expenses have been two hundred dollars, Mr. Gair" he said. "I wish I might have recovered that, too, but I thought better not to try for too much."

"Good Lord!" cried Gair. "If there was only some way I could square it all up with you!"

"Perhaps we'll go excavating some day" laughed Carton. "Just now the expenses will cover."

"I wonder" went on Gair rather plaintively, I fancied, "why, when you could get the money back, you could not get the gem. I'm asking no questions, you understand, but I can't help wondering."

Carton laughed. "Have you no superstitions, Gair?" he asked.

"Don't know. Suppose I have—like most men" grunted the financier.

"Well then, let us fancy the great Julius himself had a hand in all this and wanted his signet back. At least I have the best of reasons to believe that the gem has gone the way of all—shall I say, flesh?"

Gair looked hard at him for a moment. Perhaps he divined something of the truth. All he said was: "Well, we'll let it go at that."

Duffield Osborne